

Strategies to Approach Multiple-Choice Questions in the Classroom and on the Exam

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Preparing for Multiple-Choice Questions: The Challenges

The multiple-choice sections of the AP English Language and AP English Literature Exams are often the most challenging for both teachers and students. The multiple-choice section constitutes 45 percent of the score for each exam, and, generally, the section focuses more on the process than the product. It is hard to provide measures that guarantee success, and students are often frustrated with their lack of improvement. I have tried a number of strategies to improve my students' scores, but unfortunately, there is no "magic bullet" for success. It really comes down to frequent practice and in-depth discussions about what works and what does not for students and teachers alike.

Exam Strategy 1

Remind students that the multiple-choice section always presents a combination of easy, medium, and hard questions for each passage. These questions generally follow the chronology of the passage rather than transition from easiest to hardest or vice versa. The most important factor, however, is that they all are worth the same points. Therefore, a sound strategy for students is to make sure they get credit for all the easy and medium answers first. That means choosing which questions to answer and which ones to skip and then returning to answer if time allows. A student who spends too much time on a single, hard question may not get to answer two or three easy questions in a later part of the exam. Additionally, I advise students to do a quick check of the number of the question and the number on the Scantron forms every time they see a zero (10, 20, 30, and so on). This double-check can keep them from getting off track, having to go back to find their error, and wasting valuable time.

Exam Strategy 2

When the question refers to a part of the sentence and asks for the meaning of a word or phrase in context, what a word refers to, or how a word functions, it is best to go back to the beginning of the sentence or even to the previous sentence and read completely to the end of the sentence to comprehend the meaning. I have seen questions that ask the student what the antecedent of "this" is, and the answer is found in the preceding sentence. Students may also want to read the sentence that follows because the answer could be there.

Exam Strategy 3

If students have no idea of what the correct answer might be, instruct them to leave it blank, as there is a quarter-point penalty for guessing. This is the same process used on the SAT exam. Students who guess incorrectly actually lose the point that they would have received for a correct answer and an additional quarter-point as a penalty. This means that for every incorrect answer, students lose 1.25 points. When the exam is scored, these points are totaled and deducted from the number of correct answers.

Exam Strategy 4

If students find themselves running out of time, they can take the following approaches:

A. Scan the remaining questions and look for either the shortest questions or the questions that direct them to a specific line or lines.

These questions take less time to answer.

B. Look for questions that contain the answer without requiring the student to refer to the text. For example, "The sea slid silently from the shore" is an example of (B) alliteration. The student would not have to go back to the passage to find the answer.

Exam Strategy 5

I must preface this next strategy by saying that this works for some students and not for others. Tell students to scan the questions first but not the answers, since four out of five of them are wrong. I tell my students to skip any questions that direct them to a specific line number, and this eliminates the majority of questions. Therefore, this strategy takes only a few seconds. In the few that are left, many times hints and clues about the meaning of the passage will be revealed. Some students tell me they had no idea what the passage was saying until they read some of the questions. Other students tell me it is a waste of time to read the questions first. This strategy is really one of personal preference. I usually ask students to try the strategy a few times and then do what works best for them.

Exam Strategy 6

One way to ensure that students finish the entire multiple-choice section is to have them scan the number of questions and divide the number by two. For example, if there are 54 questions, and students have 60 minutes to complete the section, students should be around question 27 after 30 minutes. Another strategy is to divide the time by the number of passages. For example, if students have four passages to read and one hour to complete the exam,

they should allot 15 minutes to each passage. The advantage of this method is that every passage has a number of easy and medium questions, and by moving steadily the students will receive the maximum number of points. Do not tell the students that there will be four passages; while four is often the number of sections in the multiple-choice section, I have seen as many as five. One year a student told me she did not even get to the last passage because she assumed there would be only four. Students must take responsibility for managing their time on the exam.

Practice, Practice, Practice

There is no secret formula for success on the multiple-choice section of the AP English Exams. Hard work, frequent practice, and practice using sound methods and strategies should demystify the multiple-choice section, giving students more confidence and, ideally, resulting in higher scores and better passing rates.